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SUBJECT: COLOMBIA'S RISING YOUNG POLITICIANS ON MARCH 12
CONGRESSIONAL ELECTIONS

REF: A. BOGOTA 1858

1B. BOGOTA 1447

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Wood, Reasons: 1.4 b & d.

Summary

11. (C) Over a dozen, up-and-coming political candidates from the Liberal, Conservative, Cambio Radical, Polo Democratico Alternativo (Polo), and the "U" parties shared their impressions with poloffs on the March 12 Congressional elections, the role of the paramilitaries, the future of the parties, and the challenges facing President Uribe in the next Congress. Many acknowledged that the dominance of Uribe and the recent constitutional decision allowing presidents to run for a second term (giving ex-presidents a new lease on political life) would likely stall their political trajectories. Several pro-Uribe party candidates lamented that Uribe would not groom a successor. Nonetheless, they planned to support him because of his popularity and bide their time until things opened up in 2010. Several predicted Uribe would have a tougher time with the next Congress. Polo candidates, in particular, said Uribe would face (1) more Liberals and Polos in the Congress, (2) difficulties getting the Free Trade Agreement through, and (3) angry supporters complaining he did not campaign enough or distribute pork or patronage to help their campaigns. Most candidates said races would be determined by personality contests over party loyalty and substance. Many were courted by several parties and settled on the one more likely to ensure them victory. All suggested that paramilitary influence would be substantial in the elections but were short on specifics. Finally, several predicted that a young Liberal Party candidate would emerge in 2010 to win the presidency. End Summary.

Uribe Casts a Large Shadow

12. (U) In meetings over the last two weeks with more than 12 rising politicians from the five major parties, all said the constitutional decision to permit Uribe to run for a second term could postpone their opportunities to shine in the next four years. They offered two reasons. First, members of pro-Uribe parties (Conservatives, U Party, and Cambio Radical) predicted the president would not groom a successor. Younger members of Cambio Radical and the U Party said they planned to support Uribe's agenda based on his immense

popularity and bide their time until the political scene opened up in the 2010 elections. They also predicted that re-election would crowd the field since members of the & old guard⁸ including several ex-presidents would be tempted to return to the political arena. Many said former President Cesar Gaviria would be a candidate in 2010 and some speculated that former President Andres Pastrana would also wade in, although none believed he would be successful. On Pastrana, they said he had accepted the job of Ambassador in Washington as a vehicle to return to public life and re-assert control of the Conservative Party, in a way that did not put him at odds with the President.

Tougher Four Years for Uribe?

¶3. (C) Many of these candidates said Uribe would have a harder time dealing with Congress in his second term. Most predicted he would get a majority in the House, but perhaps not in the Senate. Samuel Moreno Rojas, President of the Polo, pointed to several factors that could challenge Uribe, including an increased presence of Liberals and Polo in the House and Senate, difficulties passing the Free-Trade Agreement, and resentment by Uribe supporters that he did not spend enough time campaigning for them (U Party candidates disagree with this last point. They know he is in a tough spot in terms of public opinion regarding a sitting president campaigning for himself or members of Congress. Also see ref A.) Pro-Uribe candidates also complained that the President's coattails did not appear to extend very far. Most were convinced that Uribe's huge popularity rating (70-75%) would not automatically translate into big wins for them or him on March 12. Partido de la U leader Juan Manuel Santos acknowledged that he had anticipated a much larger boost for his pro-Uribe party's candidates than they were seeing so far.

Party Loyalty a Fluid Concept

¶4. (U) Many candidates, links with their parties appear tenuous at best and most candidates admitted that they had been tempted by offers from other parties. Candidates from Cambio Radical, the U Party, and the Polo noted Uribe's success as an independent, leading them to believe that traditional Liberal and Conservative parties were not necessarily their best bet. The biggest factor cited for selecting a party was the candidate's ability to win a seat. At the same time, many mentioned strong party leadership as a prime factor in choosing Cambio Radical over the U Party and the Liberal Party over the Polo. Candidates repeatedly characterized the election as a popularity contest, as opposed to an issues election (ref B), with some candidates, sole distinction being whether they were pro-Uribe or not. Complicating this dynamic is that many parties do not have strong, if any, platforms.

What Will Become of the Parties?

¶5. (C) The candidates stressed that many of the parties are new (the U Party was founded less than 6 months ago), which did not engender much loyalty. Those from the more established parties predicted the newer Uribista parties would diminish significantly or dissolve over the next four years. Liberal and Polo candidates wagered that the U party (made up of many former Liberals with strong ties to Uribe) would disappear altogether as Liberals rejoin the party for the 2010 elections. In the opposing camp, German Chica, Secretary General of the U Party, characterized the Polo, on

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the left, as & a group of misfits with nothing in common and no place to go.⁸ One area of agreement among all is that the Conservatives are in for a rude awakening come March 12.

Although many predict a respectable showing for the Conservatives in House races, some see them finishing in fourth place in the Senate, far behind the Liberals, who are expected to gain seats. Nicolas Uribe, House candidate for the U party, compared the Liberals' resurgence and focus on youth to the lack of youth and leadership in the Conservative Party. He also said Conservatives' failure to run a candidate for president in the last two presidential elections was a symptom of their malaise and would harm them in the long term.

Paramilitary Influence Not Diminished

16. (C) The majority agreed that paramilitary influence in the 2006 elections would be substantial, perhaps even greater than the 2002 elections, but were short on specifics. Rafael Merchan, House candidate for Cambio Radical, characterized the 2006 paramilitary influence as camouflaged and more sophisticated, having learned from past mistakes. He speculated that these groups would try to be less evident in exerting their influence, but they would still be heavily involved, particularly at the mayoral level. Sergio Diazgranados, Senatorial candidate for the U Party, said paramilitaries in 2002 & acted like orangutans, clumsy and obvious,⁸ but that despite a lower profile and almost no presence on election day, they would be more influential in these elections. He concluded that candidates were less likely to experience direct threats since paramilitaries were better organized, already had people established in politics, and would employ the use of money to influence voters and candidates. Most said popular politicians who had been expelled from their parties for alleged paramilitary ties (Maloof, Arias, Pineda, Castro, Vives) would be elected on another party ticket, thereby guaranteeing a sympathetic bloc of Members of Congress.

2010 Elections

17. (C) The early bets are on a candidate emerging from the Liberal Party, backed by a center-left coalition in 2010. There are several reasons to expect this, they say, including that many politicians in the Uribista parties are tipped to distance themselves from the President, with the Liberal Party possibly enticing one of the bigger names to run as its candidate. German Olano, Liberal candidate for Congress and Ana Maria Gonzalez, Liberal candidate for Senate, both predicted that German Vargas Lleras, the President of Cambio Radical (a leading pro-Uribe party) would rejoin the Liberals within the next two years. Former President Gaviria is positioning himself to run in 2010 and many believe he will be a factor despite his age (Note: Gaviria will only be 59 in 2010 but the last few presidents elected were in their 40s). Many of these candidates, including Uribistas, predict that Uribe cannot retain his unrivaled popularity and that the vacuum he leaves will lead to a left-center victory in 2010 by a Liberal with strong security credentials. Former Mayor of Bogota Enrique Penalosa and two current candidates for the Liberal Party nomination, Rafael Pardo and Rodrigo Rivera, are also expected to be legitimate challengers in 2010. Members of the Polo Democratico also believe they will have a chance in 2010 which a greater focus on economic and social issues.

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